SPECIAL REPORT

Churches urged to view AIDS with compassion

Christians examine fears at conference

By **Debbie Warhola**
Gazette Telegraph

When a hospital worker asked Ralph Pierce how he contracted AIDS, the Baptist minister had to ask:

"Is the treatment any different? Is the dosage of AZT less if I got it one way or another?"

It's not.

But many people, including Christians, base their level of involvement and compassion on how someone got the disease, said Pierce's widow, the Rev. Juliette Pierce, a Maryland minister.

"If a person got AIDS through a behavior someone doesn't approve of or doesn't feel is in accordance with the Bible, a number of Christians feel no obligation to be compassionate because if you lay down with dogs, you get up with fleas," Pierce told about 40 participants Friday at the second annual Christian Conference on AIDS.

"The issue facing our churches is: AIDS is here, and there are people in need. Are you going to help or not?"

The two-day conference is sponsored by Faith, Hope and Love Community Services, a local, nonprofit nurse-managed outpatient program for people with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Continuing today at Radiant Church Assembly of God, the conference for national church and lay leaders explores how churches can overcome fears and lend a hand.

The topic is important for churches nationwide, said Christie Hinds, a registered nurse who founded Faith, Hope and Love.

"But it's a hard subject for the church to talk about," she said.

Locally, at least 10 churches have had members who are HIV infected, and at least two pastors' families have been affected by AIDS since 1986, she said.

Some local churches are addressing the issue by sending participants. Jerry Price, a graphic artist at Focus on the Family and member of Woodmen Valley Chapel, said he will use the seminar information to help his church establish an AIDS policy and speak to youth groups around the city about AIDS prevention.

"When the church in America should have been reaching out to those sick with AIDS, regardless of sin, they haven't," Price said. "But there's hope, and we as Christians need to keep trying."

Pierce said the church is society's best-equipped institution to handle many of the issues surrounding AIDS.

"No other institution can minister to people's broken hearts and spirits like the church," she said. "Who else can dry their eyes and let them know of the hope and promises to come?"

Yet in the 13 years since HIV was identified by the world's medical community, many churches have turned a deaf ear, she said, largely out of fear.

"Fear has a serious impact on the church; it paralyzes people and keeps the church from being what God created it to be — a place of unconditional love. Fear binds the hands, feet and hearts," Pierce said.

Many people still don't understand how HIV is transmitted.

"They think if they interact with someone who has this disease, they will become infected, too, and then condemned and rejected," Pierce said.

And because AIDS in early years was dubbed "the gay disease" both church leaders and members — particularly those that view homosexuality as immoral — tended to ignore, condemn or ostracize AIDS patients and their families.

Pierce said she and her husband kept their secret from their fellow congregation members at a small church in Virginia because of the stigma surrounding AIDS.

"At the time in our lives when we most needed support and had so much to give in our own testimony, we couldn't reach out," she said.

Pierce, now one of six associate ministers at Cornerstone Peaceful Bible Baptist Church in Marlboro, Md., and a board member of a national Christian-based AIDS ministry, Love In Action, suggests several steps for churches to become involved:

■ Begin by educating church staff and congregation about the facts. Gather resources and materials on the subject, Pierce recommends, and host speakers from local AIDS agencies or families in the community personally touched by the disease.

■ Come up with a written policy, detailing the church's views on the issue.

"Leadership should point to the Bible, here's what it says, here's what we believe, and affirm they won't tolerate narrow-mindedness and rejection," Pierce said.

■ Establish an open environment for people who are infected and their families and friends.

■ Incorporate the issue into Sunday school curriculum and Bible studies. The church also can develop a prevention program, talking with youth about abstinence and Biblical teachings, Pierce said.

"The church has a prime opportunity to provide spiritual support through AIDS ministry," Pierce said. "I see it happening more and more — there's a surge of churches that want to get involved and are understanding the need today, but we still have a ways to go."

Book recounts how churches turned away AIDS-stricken family

Springs pastor among those criticized

Associated Press

Matthew Allen had battled AIDS for all of his 12 years. Death seemed imminent, and he was saying goodbye at the place that had nurtured him, among friends who looked upon him as another kid rather than someone with an incurable disease.

One by one, adults and children said their farewells. To the music "The Circle of Life" from the movie "The Lion King," the children paraded around Matt, surrounding him with music, banners and love.

Looking on at the celebration of his grandson's life, the Rev. Jimmy Allen, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, could only marvel at how the spirit of Christ was present in this place: Lakewood Elementary School.

And he could only reflect with sadness on how the church he loved had turned its back on his grandson and his family. Even in this prominent Southern Baptist family, when AIDS struck, churches in Colorado Springs and Texas turned their backs.

"I'm not angry at God," Allen said in a telephone interview from Big Canoe, Ga., where he is chaplain at a mountain resort community. "I'm sad because the family of faith is dysfunctional and needs serious change."

For years, Allen and his family suffered in silence.

Now, in a book due out next month titled "Burden of a Secret: A Story of Truth and Mercy in the Face of AIDS," the prominent Southern Baptist minister reveals his painful journey of faith.

Allen entered what he calls his decade of Gethsemane — the place Jesus spent the night before his crucifixion — in 1985 when he found out his daughter-in-law Lydia had contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion during her first pregnancy. Lydia, Matthew and Bryan, a second son born before the bad blood was discovered, were infected with the virus.

Matthew's father, Scott Allen, was the minister of education at First Christian Church in Colorado Springs. When he found out about the disaster that had struck his family, he informed the senior pastor.

Scott Allen had hoped for a measure of concern, counsel and compassion, his father said. The pastor's response: You're fired. Shortly after, Jimmy Allen said, Matthew was kicked out of the church's day-care center and the entire family was told to find another church.

The Rev. Gaylord Hatler, the current pastor of First Christian Church, said the pastor during Scott Allen's tenure there remembered only telling Scott to take time off to collect himself. But Hatler went on to say that at the time, "everybody was, it seemed to me, afraid." Now, he said, the situation would be handled differently.

"I think that the difference today is that there would be a much larger group that would reach out to those persons, and a smaller group that would be offended," Hatler said.

When the family moved to Dallas and moved in with Jimmy Allen and his wife, church after church refused to enroll Matthew in Sunday school. Bryan died shortly after the move.

"Good churches. Great churches. Wonderful people. Chuches pastored by fine men of God, many of whom I had mentored. Nobody had room for a boy with AIDS," Allen writes.

The pain would not end there for Jimmy Allen and his family. Another son, Skip, told his father that he was gay and also infected with the virus.

The church's response to AIDS would make indelible impressions on each family member.

For Skip, judgmentalism and rejection have driven him away from organized religion, his father said. Scott has left the Christian ministry, and is exploring Eastern religions.

Matthew — who has survived far longer than expected, and hopes to see his 13th birthday next month — believes in eternal life in a "peaceful place" with his mother and brother, but he has little use for the church.

"He just says, 'They kicked me out,' " Jimmy Allen says.

CITY/REGION

Speed trap nets suspected car thief

By **Marcus Montoya**
Gazette Telegraph

Normally, police with radar guns nab only speeders. Colorado Springs police officer Kerry Haug caught a bit more.

At about 5:45 a.m. Friday, Haug was parked along Austin Bluffs Parkway near Union Boulevard, her radar gun aimed at westbound traffic in a 35-mph zone. The device, trained on an Oldsmobile Delta 88, flashed 65 mph.

Haug pulled the driver over and smelled alcohol. His eyes were bloodshot and his speech was slurred, the officer said. He failed the roadside sobriety test and his breath-alcohol test was 0.125 — well above the legal limit.

Then came the questions.

After checking the license plates with motor vehicle records, Haug and officer Steve Janne knew the driver wasn't the car's owner.

"He wasn't able to tell us the name of the car owner," Haug said. "He said it was his friend's. We asked, 'What's your friend's name?' He said, 'I don't remember.'

"We went, 'Hmmm. That's probably not right,' " she said.

A few hours earlier, other officers had taken a report of a break-in at Ed Bozarth Oldsmobile on Academy Boulevard. Putting Oldsmobile and Oldsmobile together, Haug and Janne came up with suspected car thief.

Police said the owner left his car at the Oldsmobile shop for paint and body work. Shortly after 4 a.m., someone broke in through a window in the bay door and avoided tripping motion sensors inside, said Brad Hovis, body shop manager.

An alarm finally went off as the car was driven out. Less than two hours later, police had the car back and a suspect in custody — thanks to Haug's radar gun and a pretty strong hunch she was being lied to.

"What he said just didn't fit."

Jereme Schweinhardt, 20, was arrested on suspicion of second-degree burglary, aggravated motor vehicle theft, drunken driving, underage drinking and, of course, speeding.

"We were really impressed," Hovis said. "Just because of the fact that they were able to catch him on something totally unrelated to what happened here. It was very quick and very painless for everyone involved.

"Except for the guy that did it."

STATE

Greeks' alcohol ban endorsed

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